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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TAIPEI 003604

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SUBJECT: KMT CHAIRMAN MA SUFFERS FALLOUT FROM DEPOSE CHEN
MOVEMENT

REF: TAIPEI 3589

Classified By: Director Stephen M. Young, Reason(s): 1.4 (B/D).

11. (C) Summary: After more than six weeks of demonstrations, Shih Ming-te's "Depose President Chen" movement has failed to topple Chen, but has ironically weakened KMT Chairman and Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jeou and boosted PFP Chairman James Soong. A drop in Ma's approval rating largely reflects Deep Blue anger that he has not taken a stronger stand in support of moves to oust Chen. James Soong utilized Shih's movement to claw his way back to political relevance, just in time to launch his Taipei mayoral campaign. This open challenge by Soong to Pan-Blue unity and the potential for another challenge by KMT LY Speaker Wang Jin-pyng compound Ma's current problems. Until recently, many assumed Ma Ying-jeou was a virtual shoo-in to be elected president in 2008. Now, observers here are not so sure. In this highly volatile political climate and with important elections coming up in Taipei and Kaohsiung, Ma now needs to neutralize Soong, contain Wang, and keep President Chen and the DPP on the defensive over corruption allegations. End Summary.

Ma Tries and Fails to Have It Both Ways

12. (C) In handling the "Depose Chen" movement over the past six weeks, Ma Ying-jeou tried unsuccessfully to juggle his two roles as KMT Chairman and Taipei Mayor. Deep Blue supporters expected KMT Chairman Ma to play a strong leadership role in the anti-Chen movement, but Mayor Ma, responsible for public order in the city, was careful to keep some distance from the street protests. Deep Blue KMT legislator Joanna Lei told AIT that most Pan-Blue supporters expected Ma to take a clear stand against Chen and were unsympathetic to Ma's conflicting responsibilities as Taipei mayor. Ma was widely perceived as weak and wavering, for which he has been punished in public opinion polls. An October 14 public opinion poll by the pro-Blue United Daily News (UDN) showed only 47 percent of the public were "satisfied" with Ma, down 11 points from late September, and 33 points below his extraordinarily high 80 percent approval following KMT victories in local elections in December 2005. Other media polls show similar results. (Comment: It is not clear whether the Ma's downturn will be temporary or longer lasting. These polls measure approval ratings, not expected voter behavior. End Comment.)

13. (C) While many Deep Blue supporters are unhappy with Ma for not taking a strong enough stand in support of the anti-Chen movement, some of the much larger body of moderate "swing" voters may also be disenchanted with Ma. Many of these centrist voters had hoped that Ma was a "new" kind of Taiwanese politician, capable of bridging the Blue-Green gap and willing to put responsible leadership before party politics. They expected Ma as Taipei mayor to remain impartial toward the anti-Chen protests. Instead, Ma publicly supported the "Depose Chen" movement, appeared at one rally, and even suspended normal demonstration curfew laws to allow 24-hour protest activities for a full month. Ma's unwillingness to stay above the fray caused one self-identified swing voter to lament to AIT that "Ma was no different than any other politician."

KMT Backs Off No Confidence Vote

14. (C) Ma and the KMT launched a second pan-Blue recall drive against President Chen, which as expected failed to pass on October 13. PFP Chairman James Soong then urged Ma to join him in moving immediately to a no confidence motion against Premier Su Tseng-chang. A no confidence vote would require President Chen to appoint a new premier and the President would also have the option of dissolving the LY, forcing a snap LY election. Ma rejected Soong's call, and most KMT legislators had no interest in a motion that could potentially cost many of them their seats. KMT legislator Justin Chou told AIT that the KMT wanted to avoid intra-party conflict over the issue on the LY floor. Chou also explained that the timing was not right, and said the KMT would wait

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until the prosecutor's office released its Presidential Office investigation report before deciding whether to support further action against the Chen administration, in the form of either a third recall effort or a no confidence vote. Recent polls indicate the public does not support either measure at this time.

Wang Jin-pyng Waiting in the Wings

15. (C) One reason Ma is opposed to a no confidence vote that would unseat Su Tseng-chang is his well-founded fear -- see Wang's comments to the Director in reftel -- that Chen might appoint KMT LY Speaker Wang Jin-pyng as his next Premier. Wang, a Taiwanese from the south, is the primary rival within the KMT for Ma, a Taipei mainlander. Ma is concerned that Wang, like himself, wants to become the KMT presidential candidate in 2008. Wang is popular outside as well as inside the KMT. An October 17 TVBS public opinion poll for the first time put Wang ahead of Ma in public approval ratings. Wang controls a small group of six to eight legislators who are loyal to him personally. For these reasons, Ma has no choice but to tolerate and cater to Wang, even as he maneuvers to contain him.

Shih Ming-te Packing It In?

16. (C) In support of Shih Ming-te's anti-Chen movement, several Deep Blue politicians, including James Soong, disrupted the October 10 national day celebrations by chanting slogans and waving banners during President Chen's speech and interfering with a military honor guard parade. On the same day members of Shih's movement pounded on the cars of foreign dignitaries attending the ceremony and made a point of demonstrating without police permission, which they had not done before. These antics seem to have turned public opinion against the anti-Chen movement: in a poll one day after the national day demonstrations, 54 percent of the public said it was time for the protest to end. Shih has checked into a hospital for health reasons and his movement

has sharply scaled back demonstrations. Shih and his followers are planning to launch a new round of larger demonstrations when the prosecutor's report on Chen is released, perhaps later this month. Many observers here, however, expect the "Depose Chen" movement to continue to lose steam unless the prosecutor's report is very damaging to Chen.

Soong Finally Throws His Hat in the Ring

¶17. (U) James Soong, who declared his Taipei mayoral candidacy on October 17, had been laying the groundwork for months. Taking advantage of Ma's passive approach to Shih's "Depose Chen" movement, Soong joined the sit-down protest in early September and sat silently next to Shih and other protest leaders at many rallies. Soong also publicly berated Ma for not doing more to oust Chen, trying to regain support from the Deep Blue base, which has been gradually shifting toward Ma. Just before joining Shih, Soong was barely on the political radar, with a 21 percent approval rating, which shot up to 41 percent only two weeks into the anti-Chen movement, but then declined to 31 percent following his antics at the October 10 national day ceremony.

¶18. (C) Although the Shih movement may have boosted Soong's popularity to some extent, there is no sign yet that this will translate into support for his mayoral campaign. In polling on the Taipei mayoral contest, Soong's numbers continue to be very low, hovering around ten percent. Even these lower numbers suggest, however, that in a close race, Soong could siphon enough votes away from KMT mayoral candidate Hau Long-bin to throw the race to Hsieh. At this point, Soong may have little chance of winning Taipei mayor, but he will certainly continue trying to use his "spoiler" role to extract concessions from Ma and the KMT.

KMT: Show Some Backbone, Ma!

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¶19. (C) Former Control Yuan President Fred Chien told AIT Director on October 17 that increasing numbers of mainstream KMT are fed up with Soong's confrontational policies, including his push for a no confidence vote and his continued opposition to the government's arms package. They want Ma to stand up to Soong and stop allowing the leader of a small rump party to hold the main opposition party hostage.

Comment

¶10. (C) With his mayoral campaign, Soong has now publicly challenged Ma and the KMT. Ma also faces a lurking challenge to his authority from Wang Jin-pyng. Soong and Wang have both managed to make the best of the "Depose Chen" movement, while Ma seems to have made the worst of it. To stop his declining popularity, Ma will have to demonstrate the sort of decisive leadership we have not seen from him yet if he is to neutralize Soong, contain Wang, and keep President Chen and the DPP on the defensive over corruption allegations. Whether he will be able to show this leadership after his mayoral tenure ends in December and he can focus on his role as KMT Chairman remains a question.

YOUNG